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After a Smooth Change, Pledge From Thai Chief

In most countries where dictatorship is the style of government the death of a strongman provokes a power struggle among his would-be successors.

But in Thailand last week the transfer of power occasioned by the death Dec. 8 of Marshal Sarit Thanarat, 55, Thai ruler since 1957, apparently came off smoothly. Succeeding Sarit was Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn, a 52-year-old career army officer, who had served as Sarit's right-hand man for the past six years, including one brief, inglorious stint as premier.

Although General Thanom retained his post as defense minister after taking over the premiership, he named subordinates to three key jobs that Sarit had held himself. Sarit had been supreme commander of the armed forces, commander of the army, and chief of police. General Thanom's delegation of these three posts could be considered risky. In Thailand, changes of government normally are accomplished through military coup. There have been at least 13 such coups (one estimate is 26) since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

What His Pledge Was

One of General Thanom's first moves after taking office was to pledge that his strategically located country would continue the pro-West, anti-Communist policies of his predecessor.

When Sarit took power in 1957 he, too, made a similar pledge. Nevertheless, at that time the Eisenhower Administration had many doubts about the blunt, rotund officer who commanded the Thai army.

A heavy drinker and man about town, Sarit shared in the graft and corruption rampant in Thai officialdom in the immediate postwar years. A millionaire, he had shipping and banking interests and owned at least three newspapers, one of them the most virulently anti-American publication in Bangkok.

Sarit's newspapers often read as if they had been edited in Peking, constantly referring to Americans as "imperialists." However, much of his apparently anti-Western attitude probably stemmed from self-interest. He believed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was supporting his rival, the chief of police.

So Washington was justifiably perturbed when Sarit moved his tanks into Bangkok Sept. 16, 1957, and took over the government. He immediately announced that Thailand's pro-West policy would remain unchanged. Then he installed General Thanom as premier and then flew off to Washington for needed surgery for cirrhosis of the liver.

During Sarit's absence, General Thanom could get nowhere with the country's squabbling legislature.

Rewrote the Constitution

The Thai government was in near chaos when a still ailing Sarit returned from convalescence in Britain in October 1958 and displaced General Thanom. Sarit banned political parties, cracked down on the press, which was generally leftist, jailed a few hundred Communists, and rewrote the constitution.

Under Sarit, Thailand lined up firmly with the United States in opposition to Chinese advances into Southeast Asia. But U.S. policy toward neighboring Laos worried Sarit. As the Western position in Laos eroded, he revived his old talk about neutralism.

But Sarit's prattling about neutrality was probably mostly bluff. He was always tough on Communists at home and was making efforts to clean up Thailand's Red-infested northeast area.

Whether Thanom Kittikachorn will run the country in the same no-nonsense way remains in doubt. Washington officials believe General Thanom gained sufficient confidence and experience in his years as defense minister and deputy premier under Sarit to improve upon his earlier record. Barring another coup, Washington foresees no serious trouble in Thailand.